

News is bent and battered in

Cairo

By WILLIAM F. SCHMICK 3d

NOT long ago, a Cairo-based reporter for a Western newspaper filed a story on the Sudan. He handed his copy to the Cairo cable office, fully realizing that it might be censored and neither he nor his editors would ever be told what deletions were made.

What he did not know was that the story was totally suppressed — that is, never sent. Also never delivered, he later discovered, were seven increasingly frantic cables from his editors asking where the story was. Another Western reporter in Cairo filed a routine story based on an official statement by a government spokesman. The Egyptian censor—apparently deciding the statement was unwise or ill-founded—changed it, but so skillfully that the reporter's editor never realized the alteration and thus printed an incorrect story.

Still another Western reporter received a cable from his office requesting a story on "the successes of the Islamic summit conference" (held two months ago). The reporter subsequently discovered his office had actually requested a story on "the successes and failures . . ." but the Cairo censor deleted the last two words.

Stricter now than ever

Censorship has always been a recognized hazard for reporters trying to cover the Middle East. To varying degrees and in differing ways it is applied in all Arab countries and in Israel. But long-time residents of Cairo say it has never been stricter and — as the above examples show—never more treacherous nor more ludicrous.

The blue pencil is not the only weapon. Correspondents are limited in where they can go, whom they can talk to and what they can read.

In all Egypt, the only areas now open to reporters (and tourists, as well) are Cairo, the nearby Pyramids at Giza, the

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upper Nile cities of Luxor and Aswan and the Mediterranean port of Alexandria.

But to get to Alexandria, a reporter may not drive along the direct Nile delta road. The government apparently fears he would photograph or gather information about the Egyptian air bases along this road.

Instead, a reporter must drive the longer road that doglegs through the desert, or take the train. The Suez Canal Zone has been officially off limits for a number of months now.

Access to public officials is tightly controlled. Although there are exceptions, appointments as a rule have to be cleared through the Egyptian Ministry of Information. Ministry officials are extremely polite but obviously have little influence within the government. Their "We will call you" seldom produces results.

Western reporters are thus often forced to rely on their Egyptian compatriots and Western diplomats for analysis of news, which most often comes through Cairo's official Middle East News Agency or the authoritative newspaper, *Al Ahram*.

But, according to one British reporter, the Egyptian journalists are growing cautious these days, leery of whom they talk to and what they say.

One understands why when it is recalled that only weeks ago some 30 of these journalists, including the managing director of the large daily, *Al Akhbar*, were sacked as part of a general shake-up ordered by President Nasser.

Cairo reporters—like all Egyptian residents—are afflicted by the government's sharp censorship over incoming reading matter. Although a variety of Western newspapers and magazines arrive daily in Cairo, they are held up in the censor's office. They usually appear three or four days late, if at all, and sometimes with articles or full pages cut out.

The censorship is erratic. Copies of *Time* and *Newsweek* may sometimes not be on the stands, but the salesman can usually produce them for a price. And there is one stand in Suleiman Pasha street in downtown Cairo where the *London Evening News*, a paper seldom seen outside Britain, may be had only a day late—also for a price.

Despite these barriers to fully knowledgeable reporting, Cairo remains the most important Arab capital. One Western reporter says the correspondents there have come to recognize the following unofficial guidelines:

1. Any quotation from an official source must first have been carried by Egypt's Middle East News Agency, a Cairo paper or the state-controlled radio.

2. Quotations from any unofficial source are suspect and may be censored if they are critical or unflattering to the government.

3. It is unwise for a reporter to inject his own views—a policy that makes any sort of analysis reporting very difficult.

4. Any outgoing or incoming communications—whether news reports, simple service messages between a reporter and his editors, or mail—are subject to "blind" censorship—that is, alterations or deletions of which neither sender nor receiver is advised.

In addition to their news reports, journalists based in Cairo find that their mail is sometimes opened and censored.

A West German news agency, for example, conducted its own survey and discovered that out of roughly 60 letters sent between it and its home office, about 30 per cent never arrived.

East moves in

Other reporters say their mail is sometimes opened and that personal letters will arrive with the envelopes brazenly slit and pages occasionally missing. The reasons for this behavior are unclear. At the very least, it would seem to indicate a firm belief within the Egyptian hierarchy that Western reporters are not to be trusted.

In any case, the result is that in recent years the Western press establishment in Cairo has dwindled while the Eastern has dramatically increased.

The Soviet Union now has seven or eight journalists based there. East Germany has six. Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, North Vietnam, Red China and Cuba each has its own correspondents as well.